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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 003434

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SUBJECT: NEW NATIONWIDE POLL SHOWS DIMINISHED SUPPORT FOR
MUSHARRAF

REF: ISLAMABAD 2572

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The results of a new nationwide poll show a 20 percent drop in support for President Musharraf's job performance since February -- from 54 percent to 34 percent. Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Chairman Benazir Bhutto's popularity continued to grow steadily, and she emerged as the country's most popular leader. Leaders from Pakistan's other secular opposition parties also posted significant gains. While presidential elections are indirect (it is up to the Senate, National and Provincial Assemblies to vote for President), Musharraf's flagging approval ratings will likely dictate increased political maneuvering among candidates who plan to run in upcoming general elections. The new poll shows strong disapproval of the current ruling alliance, but a plurality of Pakistanis would support a new coalition between Musharraf's ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and Benazir Bhutto's PPP, especially if President Musharraf removes his uniform. End Summary.

Public Approval for Musharraf is Low

¶2. (U) In a nationwide poll of 4000 respondents conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) between June 12 and July 3, only 34 percent of Pakistanis said they approved of President Musharraf. This represents a 20 percent drop from the last nationwide poll, conducted in February. (Note: Musharraf's approval ratings have dropped steadily since September 2006; however, a majority of respondents still approved of Musharraf's performance in February. End Note.)

¶3. (U) The most significant drop in approval was in the southern province of Sindh (25 point drop to 38 percent), followed closely by Punjab (23 point drop to 31 percent) and Balochistan (22 point drop to 39 percent). The Northwest Frontier Province held steadiest in its approval rating with a four percent drop to 36 percent.

¶4. (U) Sixty-three percent of respondents believed that President Musharraf should resign and 59 percent believed that elections would not be free and fair if Musharraf is still in uniform. Seventy-eight percent of respondents disagreed with Musharraf's declaration that exiled political leaders would not be allowed to return to Pakistan to participate in elections.

Support for Secular Opposition
Politicians is Growing

15. (U) When respondents were asked which leader they thought can best handle the problems facing Pakistan, PPP Chairman Benazir Bhutto beat President Musharraf -- with 32 percent of respondents -- for the first time since IRI's latest round of nationwide polling began in June 2006. Musharraf came in second at 27 percent, dropping from a 32 percent high in February. Support for other leading secular opposition parties has also been growing: exiled Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Nawaz Sharif came in third with a 21 percent approval rating (a six percent increase from February), and Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf leader (and former cricket star) Imran Khan came in fourth at six percent (a six percent increase since February). Support for ruling coalition partner Altaf Hussain, leader-in-exile of the Muttahida Qoumi Movement (MQM) bottomed out the losers: Hussain, together with Jamaat-Islami leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam leader Fazlur Rehman have shown no real improvement in support, and all hover below five percent.

Decreased Support for Musharraf Translates
to New Feelings About Ruling Coalitions

16. (U) President Musharraf's ruling PML did not suffer Musharraf's fate in the poll. While support for secular

ISLAMABAD 00003434 002 OF 002

opposition parties continued to grow steadily, the PML suffered only a one point drop -- from 24 percent to 23 percent. Support for ruling coalition partner MQM stayed steady at two percent. (Note: Opposition secular parties benefitted from the marked decrease in the number of "don't know/no response" answers. End Note.) For the first time, respondents also voiced very strong negative opinions about the PML-MQM ruling coalition: 67 percent said that the two parties should not keep their ruling alliance. (Note: Most respondents blamed the government and the MQM for the outbreak of violence in Karachi in May, and 89 percent agreed that there should be an investigation into the incident and those responsible should be punished. End Note.)

17. (U) Of existing coalitions, respondents favored a PPP-PML-N more than any other (47 percent). The current ruling coalition (PML-MQM) tied for last place (seven percent) with the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal coalition of religious parties. When asked about the formation of new coalitions, respondents favored a PPP-PML team more (at 42 percent) than any other.

18. (U) Clear majorities of both Pakistan Muslim League and Pakistan People's Party respondents favored a "deal" between President Musharraf and PPP Chairman Benazir Bhutto (58 percent of PML and 63 percent of PPP members). When asked in more detail, it was clear that support for a "deal" increased in both parties if Musharraf resigned from the Army and Bhutto was allowed to return to Pakistan before Parliamentary elections (vice Musharraf remaining in uniform and Bhutto returning after Parliamentary elections).

Will Poll Results Predict Politicians' Behavior?

19. (C) Comment: The poll results appear to confirm a May IRI poll from urban Punjab (reftel) and what many of President Musharraf's political advisors have been telling him for months: Musharraf paid a heavy political price for Chief Justice's suspension in March and the outbreak of violence in

Karachi in May. Since Musharraf's electoral fate will be determined by the members of Pakistan's Senate, National and Provincial Assemblies, however, there is no direct correlation between public opinion and Musharraf's prospects for re-election. End Comment.
PATTERSON